# ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

March 10, 2021 9:01 a.m.

## MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Roger Holland, Chair Senator Gary Stevens, Vice Chair Senator Shelley Hughes Senator Tom Begich

#### MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Peter Micciche

#### COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 80 "An Act relating to mental health education."

- HEARD & HELD

SENATE BILL NO. 72

"An Act relating to civics education, civics examinations, and secondary school graduation requirements; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

#### PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 80

SHORT TITLE: PUBLIC SCHOOLS: MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) GRAY-JACKSON

02/12/21	(S)	READ	THE	FIRST	TIME	-	REFERRALS
02/12/21	(S)	EDC,	HSS,	FIN			

03/10/21 (S) EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205

BILL: SB 72

SHORT TITLE: SEC. SCHOOL CIVICS EDUCATION

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) STEVENS

02/05/21 (S) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS

02/05/21 (S) EDC, CRA

#### WITNESS REGISTER

SENATOR ELVI GRAY-JACKSON Alaska State Legislator

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Sponsor of SB 80.

DELANEY THIELE, Intern

Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented the sectional analysis for SB 80.

SHIRLEY HOLLOWAY, Ph.D., President

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) National Board

Vice President

NAMI Alaska

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: During the hearing on SB 80, testified about the importance of mental health curriculum.

TIM LAMKIN, Staff

Senator Gary Stevens

Alaska State Legislature

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented SB 72 on behalf of the bill sponsor.

MICHAEL JOHNSON, Ph.D., Commissioner

Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Spoke in support of SB 72.

LEM WHEELES, representing self

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: During the hearing on SB 72, testified about the importance of civics education.

## ACTION NARRATIVE

#### 9:01:34 AM

CHAIR ROGER called the Senate Education Standing HOLLAND Committee meeting to order at 9:01 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Stevens, Begich, Hughes, and Chair Holland.

# SB 80-PUBLIC SCHOOLS: MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION

## 9:02:09 AM

CHAIR HOLLAND announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 80 "An Act relating to mental health education."

#### 9:02:39 AM

SENATOR ELVI GRAY-JACKSON, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, sponsor of SB 80, read the sponsor statement:

SB 80 amends the existing health education curriculum statute to include mental health curriculum in all K-12 health classrooms to adequately educate students on vital information pertaining to mental health symptoms, resources, and treatment.

Currently, the health curriculum guidelines include prevention and treatment of diseases; learning about "good" health practices including diet, exercise, and personal hygiene; and "bad" health habits such as substance abuse, alcoholism, and patterns of physical abuse. But the guidelines do not address mental health.

Following passage of SB80, the Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development and the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) will develop quidelines for instruction in mental health in consultation with the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) and representatives national, state, and tribal mental organizations. Such organizations include, but are not to, the National limited Council for Behavioral Health, Providence Health and Services Alaska, Southcentral Foundation, Anchorage Community Mental Health Services, Inc., North Star Behavioral Health System, and the National Alliance on Mental Health Illness Alaska. The standards will be developed in consultation with counselors, educators, students, administrators, and other mental health organizations form effective quidelines for school boards, teachers, and students.

After standards have been developed, the Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development and DEED will be responsible for implementation throughout the Alaska school system. As with existing health education curriculum, the DEED, the DHSS, and the

Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault will provide technical assistance to school districts in the development of personal safety curricula. An existing school health education specialist position will assist in coordinating the program statewide.

The State has a responsibility to treat the current mental health crisis in Alaska as a serious public health issue. By creating mental health education standards and encouraging schools to teach a mental health curriculum, SB80 aims to decrease the stigma surrounding mental illnesses and increase students' knowledge of mental health, encouraging conversation around and understanding of the issue.

## 9:05:22 AM

DELANEY THIELE, Intern, Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson, Juneau, Alaska, presented the sectional analysis for SB 80:

Section 1: This section adds intent language stating it is the intent of the Legislature that the Board of Education and Early Development develop guidelines for instruction in mental health in consultation with representatives of mental health organizations and regional tribal health organizations, including the National Council for Behavioral Health, Providence Health and Services Alaska, Southcentral Foundation, Anchorage Community Mental Health Services, Inc., North Star Behavioral Health System, and the National Alliance on Mental Health Illness Alaska.

Section 2: This section amends AS 14.30.360 by removing the word "physical" when referencing instruction for health education and adding "mental health" to the list of curriculum items each district includes in their health education programs.

Section 3: Amends AS 14.30.360 by clarifying that health guidelines developed by the Board of Education and Early Development must provide standards for instruction in mental health and be developed in consultation with the Department of Health and Social Services and representatives of national and state mental health organizations.

**Section 4:** Amends the uncodified law of the State of Alaska by adding a new section to read "the state Board of Education and Early Development shall develop the mental

health guidelines required by AS 14.30.360(b), as amended by sec. 3 of this Act, within two years after the effective date of this Act."

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON presented a video about the issues of mental health for young people in Alaska.

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON advised that the companion bill to SB 80 is HB 60, sponsored by Representative Claman.

## 9:11:44 AM

CHAIR HOLLAND commented that COVID-19 has not improved the situation, and some schools are back to in-person learning because of the high incidence of depression among students.

SENATOR STEVENS shared that on the news last night he saw a fascinating story about suicide. He said people don't talk about suicide because they are afraid it may increase the likelihood of suicide, but that is not true. He said he assumes that this program will talk about childhood suicide because it is becoming more and more of a problem because of COVID. He hopes that will be addressed in this program.

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON confirmed that suicide will be talked about. She noted that her office has a letter of support from an organization that deals with suicide prevention.

#### 9:13:57 AM

SENATOR HUGHES referenced Section 2, and said it sounds like districts are not mandated to have health classes. They are simply encouraged to initiate and conduct such a program. She asked if all districts are conducting some sort of health program and if any are already weaving this type of material into their programs.

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON answered that mental health education is not being addressed, and that is the reason for bringing the bill forward. She said she would follow up with a response to the first question.

SENATOR HUGHES said that she agreed with Senator Stevens that it is in an important discussion, but she would be concerned about the curriculum for younger kids. She would want to know what that curriculum might look like. She asked Senator Gray-Jackson if she had any examples of what other states have done.

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON responded that she would get that information.

#### 9:15:26 AM

BEGICH noted that he is one of the legislative representatives on the Suicide Prevention Council as. He shared that during the meeting last month he learned that rates of the flu and other communicable diseases have gone down during the pandemic but not rates of suicide in young people, so this legislation is timely. He has seen that the curriculum for suicide prevention generally focuses on developmental assets in early ages. It is more a positive curriculum rather than one talking about suicide. Then it shifts as students get older. As in when the legislature dealt with the teen dating issue, the Bree Moore case, the whole nature of the curriculum must be designed to meet the developmental needs of the students. That is why the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) involved in curriculum development, so that developmentally appropriate. That is what he would hope DEED would do, using the best material from other states.

CHAIR HOLLAND moved to invited testimony.

## 9:17:13 AM

SHIRLEY HOLLOWAY, Ph.D., President, National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) National Board, Vice President, NAMI Alaska, Anchorage, Alaska, Anchorage, Alaska, said that she is a former commissioner of the Department of Education Development. She found NAMI after she lost her daughter, who lived with mental illness, to suicide. NAMI is the largest grassroots mental health organization in the nation. NAMI helps build better lives. Its signature programs evidence-based. She thanked Senator Gray-Jackson for sponsoring Education, early recognition, and intervention prevention are key to minimizing mental health issues that are common in youth and adolescents and hopefully in eradicating the long-term disabilities caused by mental illness. It is so vital that Alaska's education system create a comprehensive mental health curriculum. Proper mental health is crucial to overall well-being, which is why mental health should be incorporated existing health education curriculum, programs, courses. Incorporating mental health education and addressing the myths that surround mental illness creates a broader understanding of psychiatric diseases, which will decrease stigma for those living with mental illness. Disseminating accurate information to schools and communities will increase the likelihood that children and teens struggling with symptoms

are not viewed negatively by their peers. If that can be done, it increases the odds that youth will accept treatment, and lead to improved outcomes generated by early intervention.

## 9:20:24 AM

DR. HOLLOWAY said that she applauded the young people speaking on the video. Fifty percent of mental illness develop by age 14; 75 percent by age 24. Seventy to 80 percent of children living with mental illness do not receive treatment. This leads to decreased performance in schools. Twenty-two million adolescents aged 12-17 have experienced a major depressive episode, and the estimate is that 60 percent did not receive any help treatment. The dropout rate for children with severe emotional and mental health issues was twice that of other students. According to the 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, one in three Alaskan students reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks in the past year and 22.8 percent have seriously considered suicide. This was all pre-pandemic. This year, with the isolation and associated significantly more children were seen in emergency rooms with mental health issues. The Centers for Disease Control reports that beginning in April 2020 that the rates of children's mental health emergency room visits increased and remained elevated through October.

DR. HOLLOWAY said that strengthening Alaska's existing public health curriculum to include mental health education and awareness will teach students to recognize the warning signs of mental distress and provide them with the language and resources to connect to help. This legislation expands existing health education requirements to include mental health in all K-12 health classroom. She thanked the committee for considering the importance of this legislation. In these challenging times it is more important than ever to take action to address mental health and to provide guidance and hope to all impacted by mental health issues. There is no physical health without mental health.

SENATOR STEVENS asked if she had any reflection on whether discussing suicide with a child might be dangerous because it could plant the idea in their mind. He noted that Senator Hughes asked at what age the conversation would be appropriate.

## 9:23:39 AM

DR. HOLLOWAY replied that she learned so much from the NAMI National chief medical officer. He made it clear that the evidence shows that not talking about it is dangerous. It needs

to be brought out of the dark and into the open. As Senator Begich said, the curriculum is developmentally appropriate. The ones she has seen start in kindergarten and it is about feelings. Later suicide ideation starts to be broached. It must be carefully developed and developmentally appropriate. It could begin in middle school. It has to begin early but has to be appropriate. There is lots of good material that she could provide.

SENATOR HUGHES said that she would like to hear from school districts. She just read [Anchorage School District Superintendent] Dr. Bishop's letter and is wondering if districts are already planning to incorporate something. Nothing prohibits that. She asked if the committee could see any curriculum that districts have adopted.

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON said she will look into that and speak with Dr. Bishop.

## 9:27:11 AM

CHAIR HOLLAND thanked Senator Gray-Jackson for bringing this important topic up.

He held SB 80 in committee.

#### 9:27:24 AM

At ease

## SB 72-SEC. SCHOOL CIVICS EDUCATION

#### 9:28:37 AM

CHAIR HOLLAND reconvened the meeting and announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 72 "An Act relating to civics education, civics examinations, and secondary school graduation requirements; and providing for an effective date."

He called on bill sponsor Senator Gary Stevens to introduce the bill.

#### 9:28:49 AM

SENATOR GARY STEVENS, speaking as sponsor of SB 72, said that as a retired history professor, this is a shocking time in the nation's history. He cited the examples of the Capitol invasion and tearing down statues related to American history. This is a challenge to civics education in this country. He wishes he could have gotten some of the people who invaded the Capitol in a classroom to talk about the importance of civics education.

One of his favorite parts of American history is the writing of the Constitution in 1787. After hours had been spent writing the Constitution in Independence Hall in Philadelphia, the delegates walked out. A lady asked Benjamin Franklin if this was a republic or a monarchy and his response was, "A republic, if you can keep it."

#### 9:30:15 AM

SENATOR STEVENS said the country is having trouble keeping that republic. Many Americans have trouble passing the civics test, which has 128 questions. Immigrants, incoming citizens, are expected to pass it at a certain level. They are simple questions. What is the First Amendment? How many amendments are there? What are the branches of government? What do they do? What is the purpose of the Declaration of Independence? These are simple questions that every citizen should be able to answer. It is important to help students become American citizens.

## 9:31:32 AM

LAMKIN, Staff, Senator Gary Stevens, Alaska Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, said there is a volume of evidence to support the bill, research, articles, commentary, and data. This bill sets an exit exam on civics competency for graduating seniors. There is a 128-question test administered by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, Department of Homeland Security that has been used for quite some time. Of those 128 questions, 20 questions are randomly selected and an applicant must answer 12, or 60 percent, correctly. The last time the legislature visited this subject was in 2017. At that time, 92 percent of those taking the test passed it. At that same time, in Arizona only 3 percent of graduating seniors were passing the test and 4 percent in Oklahoma. At that time, nine other states had passed a law just like this and 26 other states had active legislation proposing it. He is researching how many states have passed similar laws to date. A substantial amount of research and commentary supports this. There are other components of civics education, but at the end of the day, the purpose is to include this test or at the least have a component in the annual report from the Department of Education and Early Development to keep it on the radar. Teacher Lem Wheeles will testify. He participated in a civics taskforce in 2016-2017 that resulted in this proposal.

# 9:34:19 AM

SENATOR HUGHES asked if he knew the passing rates on the civics tests in the nine states that require it. She would hope that it is better than 3 or 4 percent.

MR. LAMKIN answered that he did not have that information in front of him, but he can say that as a result of that test, the passing rate and knowledge of civics substantially improved.

SENATOR BEGICH noted he mentioned that the federal test requires a random selection of 20 questions and a 60 percent score. This bill on page one, lines 7-9, reads receives a score of at least 60 percent on an examination consisting of at a minimum the 128 questions. Those are very different standards. He asked if the intent is 60 percent on 128 or more questions or 60 percent for 20 randomly-selected questions.

MR. LAMKIN answered that the intent of the bill is to align with the federal standards, which is 60 percent of those 20 questions.

SENATOR BEGICH said he believes that is the intent. The way it is worded would perhaps send the message that a student must get 60 percent of the 128 questions. It says of the test used by United State Citizenship. There could be a simple clarification in a technical amendment.

MR. LAMKIN replied that is a policy call. He would shoot for the higher target of 60 percent of the 128.

CHAIR HOLLAND asked Mr. Lamkin to present the sectional.

## 9:37:27 AM

MR. LAMKIN presented the sectional analysis for SB 72:

## Section 1:

AS 14.03.076, relating to public schools, adds a new section requiring high school seniors to pass a civics competency exam in order to receive a diploma. This is the same examination administered by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security for immigrants seeking U.S. citizenship.

## Section 2:

AS 14.07.168, relating to reporting requirements of the AK State Board of Education and Early Development, to include in their biennial report a description of civics education curriculum in the state, and of the success rate of the exam described in section 1.

#### Section 3:

Provides for an effective date of July 1, 2022.

CHAIR HOLLAND called on Commissioner Johnson.

#### 9:38:38 AM

MICHAEL JOHNSON, Ph.D., Commissioner, Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, Juneau, Alaska, gave the following speech:

I want to especially thank Senator Stevens who has not waivered, for years, in making sure that our public education system is built upon the purpose of civics education. We can all regret that more policy makers in our country have not shared in his efforts.

Civics education is not a new innovation, it is timeless wisdom that we have forgotten.

Plato said, schools should create good men [and women] who act nobly.

If we have an education system that does less, all our other efforts for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness will be thwarted.

According to a study from the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, only 36 percent of Americans passed a multiple-choice US citizenship test.

Less than 25 percent know why we fought the British.

Only 24 percent could name a single thing Benjamin Franklin was famous for. Thirty-seven percent think he invented the lightbulb.

Here's the proof in the pudding that Senator Stevens is right to introduce this bill: 74 percent of people sixty-five and older scored the best, answering at least six out of every ten questions correctly. Only 19 of those forty-five and younger passed - that's 81 percent scoring 59 percent or lower on the exam.

## 9:41:00 AM

This bill is not a new coat of paint on our public education system - it is a much-needed effort to repair the foundation.

Civics education is about purpose. A public education system without clear purpose is more expensive, ineffective, and corrosive to our society. A public education system with purpose is more efficient, more effective, and improves our society.

The Legislature's purpose statement is clear: AS.14.03.015

It is the policy of this state that the purpose of education is to help ensure that all students will succeed in their education and work, shape worthwhile and satisfying lives for themselves, exemplify the best values of society, and be effective in improving the character and quality of the world about them.

That's a great description of the outcome of an education purposed with civics. It is also the State Board's Vision statement.

We spend over 160 billion pennies each year on our public education system, every single one should have a purpose related to civics education.

In closing, let me say that I realize expectations are low this session. There are some that say we can't do policy work because of the pandemic and our budget situation.

But this committee is proving otherwise. You have a suite of bills before you, including reading (which is essential for any kind of civics education), virtual education, innovative funding increases, and middle college. Any single one of those bills would be impactful, but together, they reveal our priorities.

# 9:43:04 AM

These past months, my fear has been that we will lower the bar, that we will settle for less. We all want schools to be open, but I sure hope that's not our new benchmark. Open is good - purposeful and effective is essential.

Mr. Chair, and members of this committee. I know the hours you are all spending working on these bills. Thank You, Mr. Chair for working closely with each committee member and

their staffs. This committee can buck the trend and produce a package of bills that, even during a year of unprecedented difficulty, can restore, build, and excel our public education system.

A few months after giving his go to the moon speech, John Kennedy addressed a growing public questioning of why - why spend all that money. He said at a speech later that year, "We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do other things, NOT because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills." Going to the moon, was about making America better, not about improving the moon.

## 9:44:43 AM

Let's not storm the capitol, let's teach kids to read. Let's inspire them to run for school board, run for mayor, and run for the legislature. Let's show them how to work together to create good policy. Let's teach them to value liberty and never take it for granted. Let's show them how to embrace what is difficult BECAUSE it makes us better and more thankful.

In his original moon speech he said, "For while we cannot guarantee that we shall one day be first, we can guarantee that any failure to make this effort will make us last."

How can I help you make this effort on all of these bills?

#### 9:45:43 AM

SENATOR STEVENS thanked the commissioner for his inspiring thoughts and said he wished more people could hear what he said. He said the legislators are inspired and have high expectations with no intention of lowering the bar. Legislators are always accused whenever they meddle in education of passing another unfunded mandate. He asked him to reflect on the unfunded mandate issue.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON responded that it often comes up, even about reading. He rejects that notion but would invite the conversation. If folks want to have a conversation about unfunded mandates, there should be a conversation about what is being funded that is unmandated. Then there could be clarity about the purpose of the public education system.

CHAIR HOLLAND called on Lem Wheeles.

## 9:46:55 AM

LEM WHEELES, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, stated he is a social studies teacher at Dimond High School in Anchorage. He has taught U.S. Government to seniors for all of his 17 years of teaching. He also teaches Advanced Placement U.S. Government. He is a proponent of civics education and appreciates Senator Stevens' long-standing commitment to expanding civics education in the state. To address Senator Begich's comments about the number of questions and passing percentage, he has used the citizenship exam with his seniors as a preassessment summative assessment to measure progress. He has struggled with the number of questions he should be giving. He reviewed the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services website before his testimony, and it has changed the set of questions. In 2008 there was a set of 100 questions and the required score was six of 10. In 2020, the agency went to the 128-questions set and the score was 12 out of 20 questions. As of the beginning of March, the agency is returning to the 100 questions and the score of six out of 10. The committee should review that to make sure the bill matches the federal test as it changes.

#### 9:49:08 AM

MR. WHEELES stated that his mission as an educator is to prepare his students to be engaged citizens in the U.S. republic. In a normal schoolyear, he asks his government students to complete a project in experiencing government firsthand. When he introduces this "citizen project," he tells students about his experience studying French. He was never fluent in French despite studying it for 10 years because he never went to a French-speaking county. Similarly, he can teach all sorts of facts about government to students, but until they experience it first-hand, they will not develop fluency. The students choose a variety of way to engage in government, including registering to vote and voting if there is an election, registering for selective PFD check, service, filing for their attending meetings, or writing a letter to a public official. The final piece of the project is to write a reflection about what they learned. In addition to teaching the content prescribed by the Alaska content standards for government and citizenship, strives to offer authentic opportunities for his students to engage with government. He has hosted a variety of government officials in his classrooms. They experience the powerful lesson that government is made up of human beings.

## 9:51:15 AM

MR. WHEELES said the Constitution begins with "we the people" and government only functions well when the people participate He applauded Senator Stevens' efforts with SB 72, although he has some points to ponder on its approach. The bill calls for students to answer all 128 questions from the U.S. citizenship exam with a score of 60 percent. That is fine for ensuring subject knowledge, but the logistics of the bill probably need development. First, the U.S. citizenship test will be the one used prior to 2020. The language in the bill will not match the citizenship test. Second, prospective citizens only have to answer six of the 10 questions correctly. Instructional time is scarce, and administering an exam of 100 or 128 questions will take at least two hours of class time, plus the scoring time. The bill doesn't indicate if students can retake the exam if they don't pass the first time. If so, how many times and when. Most districts offer government class senior year. Some students won't be ready to take this exam until late in senior year. The margin for error with graduation on line is thin. Before mandating students complete the citizenship exam, consider requiring a semester-long government or civics course to graduate. Regulation 4 AAC 06.075 outlines the state's graduation requirements. A government or civics course is not required by the state. Probably many school districts require it, but not the state.

MR. WHEELES said if the legislature is serious about improving the level of civics education, then he would urge greater investment in the public education system. The Base Student Allocation has been flat for several years, and it is a losing battle to attract and retain quality educators. He loves what he does, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to continue teaching in Alaska as budgets shrink relative to inflation, as real income decreases for teachers, as classroom size increases. Teachers like him are the solution the legislature is seeking. He wants to continue to help young people see their role in a democratic republic. He urged the committee to amend the bill to require a government or civics course before an exam and then get the best provide public schools with the resources to possible teachers for those courses. That is what makes the most impact.

#### 9:54:55 AM

SENATOR BEGICH commented on the consequences of requiring a civics exam for graduation versus the consequences of not having a civics exam. He related that his schooling included two years of government and two years of U.S. History. It imbued a respect for the Constitution, civil discourse, and civic values. He

acknowledged that the bill would impose an increased burden on teachers if U.S. government and U.S. History classes were mandated, but said he supports that. He expressed profound concern about what people have spouted since January about their views of the Constitution, because many of those views are irreconcilable with what the Constitution actually says and does. They demonstrate an alarming lack of education. He mentioned the Texas Board of Education that selects textbooks in such large quantities that it skews the market. For example, a major political party criticized critical thinking as part of its platform. Given the current situation, he asked what has to be done to ensure that citizens can be citizens in this country when the state has finite resources.

## 9:58:05 AM

MR. WHEELES replied that he has noticed over nearly two decades a heavy emphasis on STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics] topics. The perception is that the United States is falling behind in those areas and they need to be beefed up. A lot of times that comes at the expense of social sciences. Even in the Anchorage School District, which requires a government offerings of his to graduate, the social department at Dimond have shrunk 50 percent over the last 17 years. There are now very few social sciences electives because STEM is such a district priority. He fears that government could be on the chopping block if not required by state statute or regulation. There is a tendency in society to be suspicious of people teaching about government. There is a wrong-headed belief that all teachers are liberal and anything related to politics in the classroom means students are being indoctrinated. He is a conservative and registered Republican, but he doesn't push his beliefs on his students.

# 10:00:29 AM

MR. WHEELES said he tells his students to start thinking for themselves. That critical piece is important and not something that can be tested. He doesn't oppose the notion of ensuring students have mastered government and citizenship. That is critical. The content and performance standards that may have been written in 1997 are quality standards. He understands that DEED will look at those this summer. For the final exam for his students, he gives them the government and citizenship standards and asks them to write to prove that they meet some of them. That gives him a better understanding of what they have learned than questions with straightforward answers, as opposed to questions like what it means to live in a republic and what is your role in a democratic society. He doesn't know that there is

a legislative solution for that. It is easy to test for knowledge, but more difficult to find what students have grasped and their critical thinking. To achieve that, the state needs the best teachers possible in classrooms. The state needs good teachers with manageable numbers of students to set up the opportunities to engage students in a variety of activities.

SENATOR BEGICH shared that Marjorie Menzies helped establish those standards in the '90s and he served on that committee that wrote the standards. He asked what good is STEM without the ability to have a democratic government.

## 10:04:19 AM

SENATOR STEVENS commented that public education was established to create citizens and Mr. Wheeles is doing that. The question for students about their role in a republic is crucial. He would appreciate any of Mr. Wheeles' students letting the committee know how they feel.

CHAIR HOLLAND asked if any of his students are listening.

MR. WHEELES answered that it is spring break, but he plans to share the recording with them.

SENATOR HUGHES asked how many districts require government for graduation.

MR. LAMKIN said he is actively polling for that information.

SENATOR STEVENS said the National Conference of State Legislators had a wonderful program many years ago called Legislators in the Classroom. He encouraged all legislators to participate.

SENATOR BEGICH suggested that Mr. Wheeles invite the committee members to his classrooms.

CHAIR HOLLAND added that the important thing is that they understand that they are just people.

#### 10:06:59 AM

CHAIR HOLLAND held SB 72 in committee.

#### 10:07:45 AM

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Holland adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 10:07 a.m.